

# MACLEAN'S

Unschooling has its appeal. But can it work?

There isn't a company in Canada that encourages "unworking"

May 30, 2011

Self-directed learning sounds like a great time. I would have loved to experience education as guided by my own curiosity, taught at my own pace, and marked by my own individual achievements. Want to learn about frogs? Sure! How to count change? Yes! The Harper government? Er—why not!? In theory, this type of 'unchooling' seems like the best model for education. Students typically absorb information more effectively if they are genuinely interested in the subject matter, rather than forced to follow a curriculum. And when compared to the structure of the conventional school system, whereby grades are often prioritized over actual learning, it's not hard to see why some parents have opted for this model of education for their children.

But the unschooling movement, which recently garnered mainstream attention when two unschooling-advocate parents were featured in a story about their [genderless baby](#), is not without its limitations. Unlike typical homeschooling, whereby parents often follow the provincial curriculum, or else set their own guidelines for instruction, [unschooled children](#) call the shots entirely. It sounds like a good idea in theory, but are unschooled children headed for a rough ride when someone else inevitably takes the reign?

The trouble with unschooling is that it eventually must come to an end. A child may decide to enter the mainstream education system to get the necessary prerequisites for university, or else choose to enter the workforce when he or she deems appropriate. The difficulty, then, is that the individual will be hard-pressed to find an 'Unschooling U,' and, as far as I know, there isn't a company in Canada offering strong support for an unworking movement. There's no such thing as unpaying your taxes, unreporting for jury duty, or unfollowing the speed limit on a busy road. Self-determination is a freedom we enjoy in a democratic society, but it is not an absolute. And for children who are given complete control over their education during their formative years, this hard reality may come as a bit of a shock later in life.

There are other potential problems with an unschooling education, including the limitations of parental instruction and possible gaps in knowledge. But I'd say the greater drawback of allowing a child total control over his or her education, absent any schedules, testing, or other forms of accountability, is that it sets an unrealistic and transitory precedent about autonomy and responsibility in everyday life. Like it or not, most people are going to have to show up for work at 9 a.m, pay their taxes on time, and figure out how to register their new vehicles. Gaps in physics knowledge can be easily remedied, but a skewed worldview cannot be.

Tags:

[unschooling](#)

Get the Best of *Maclean's* straight to your inbox.

Sign up for news, commentary, analysis and promotions. Join 80,000+ Canadian readers.